

# Higher education and social action in Portugal: expansion and funding in recent contexts (2015-2022)

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## Abstract

This article aims to analyze the expansion and funding of higher education in Portugal and its repercussions on Social Action in Higher Education (ASES, acronym in Portuguese) policy between 2015 and 2022. The research, which uses a qualitative approach, is based on a bibliographic review and document analysis. The results of the study indicate growth in enrollments in higher education institutions in Portugal, especially in polytechnic education. Funding for this level of education remained mostly state-funded, with an average of 57% of the budget coming from public resources. Within the scope of ASES, low coverage was observed, with percentages of attendance between 19% and 21% of enrolled students, with no significant variations over the period. In addition, there was a decline in public funding for this policy, revealing weaknesses in ensuring student retention. The research data also point to a scenario of expanded access, but with structural limits to equity in Portuguese higher education.

Keywords: Higher Education. Social Action in Higher Education. Expansion. Funding.

## Educação superior e ação social em Portugal: expansão e financiamento em contextos recentes (2015-2022)

## Resumo

Este artigo objetiva analisar a expansão e o financiamento da educação superior em Portugal e suas repercussões na política de Ação Social no Ensino Superior

(ASES), entre 2015 e 2022. A pesquisa, de abordagem qualitativa, baseia-se em revisão bibliográfica e análise documental. Os resultados do estudo indicam crescimento nas matrículas das IES em Portugal, sobretudo no ensino politécnico. O financiamento desse nível educacional permaneceu majoritariamente estatal, com média de 57% do orçamento proveniente de recursos públicos. No âmbito da ASES, observou-se baixa cobertura, com percentuais de atendimento entre 19% e 21% dos estudantes matriculados, sem variações significativas ao longo do período. Além disso, constatou-se retração no financiamento público para essa política, revelando fragilidades na garantia da permanência estudantil. Os dados da investigação sinalizam ainda um cenário de ampliação do acesso, mas com limites estruturais à equidade no ensino superior português.

Palavras-chave: Educação Superior. Ação Social no Ensino Superior. Expansão. Financiamento.

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## **Educación superior y acción social en Portugal: expansión y financiación en contextos recientes (2015-2022)**

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### 2

#### **Resumen**

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la expansión y financiación de la educación superior en Portugal y sus repercusiones en la política de Acción Social en la Educación Superior (ASES, acrónimo en portugués) entre 2015 y 2022. La investigación, de enfoque cualitativo, se basa en una revisión bibliográfica y análisis documental. Los hallazgos del estudio indican un crecimiento en las matriculaciones en las instituciones de educación superior en Portugal, especialmente en la educación politécnica. La financiación para este nivel de educación siguió siendo mayoritariamente estatal, con un promedio del 57% del presupuesto proveniente de recursos públicos. En el contexto de la ASES, se observó una baja cobertura, con porcentajes de atención entre el 19% y el 21% de los estudiantes matriculados, sin variaciones significativas durante el período. Además, se constató una reducción en la financiación pública para esta política, revelando fragilidades en la garantía de la permanencia de los estudiantes. Los datos de la investigación también apuntan a un escenario de ampliación

del acceso, pero con límites estructurales a la equidad en la educación superior portuguesa.

Palabras clave: Educación Superior. Acción Social en la Educación Superior. Expansión. Financiación.

## Introduction

The scenario of globalization, witnessed in recent decades, marks a process of political convergence that guides government education agendas. In such a scenario, an intense debate is promoted regarding educational policies in higher education. This educational level is conducted to achieve “good practice” goals taken under the scope of comparability between the countries that make up the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Its expansion, with regard to the number of enrollments made, requires an improvement based on the ratio of the number of students per teacher and the optimization of resources, in the face of a discourse to promote efficiency and effectiveness. Higher education is oriented to standardization mechanisms and redirects it to a process of economic competitiveness at the international level.

In Portugal, the Bologna Declaration, signed in 1999, was decisive for the reconfiguration of higher education, guiding this level of education to the demands of the globalized world. As noted by Albuquerque and Seixas (2017, p. 11), the reforms implemented under the Bologna Process were intended to consolidate a European area of higher education and revealed the transition from a logic centered on academic concerns to a predominantly political and technical approach. This orientation manifests itself, in an expressive way, to the extent that higher education institutions submit

[...] the criteria of effectiveness and efficiency in the respective management, the determination of knowledge parameters and learning contents by priority reference to criteria of usefulness and functionality for the labor market, comparability between institutions [...] (Albuquerque; Seixas, 2017, p. 11).

Thus, in this context of changes and adaptation to the new formats required by adherence to the Bologna Process, Portugal implemented a set of changes in the laws and decrees that regulated education. Among which, we highlight the publication of Law No. 62/2007, which establishes "the legal regime of higher education institutions (RJIES, acronym in Portuguese), regulating, in particular, their constitution, attributions and organization, the operation and competence of their bodies [...]" (Portugal, 2007, p. 7).

Law No. 62/2007 boosted a management model in the management paradigms of the private sector in Portuguese public higher education institutions (IES, acronym in Portuguese). It is also worth mentioning the increase in the weight of public IES own revenues from this regulation. Velho (2019) points out that the Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions (RJIES, acronym in Portuguese) contained objectives that focused on the diversification of funding sources with budgetary purposes focused on increasing private contribution, which would be driven both by the weight of tuition and by support for bank loans to students.

4 Under the scope of these reconfigurations, the expansion and funding of higher education in Portugal take on new frameworks: a diversified higher education, with also diversified sources of funding — resources from State tax revenues, IES own revenues, transfer revenues within the scope of public administrations and community funding. In this scenario, the resources allocated to Social Action in Higher Education constitute a relevant dimension of this diversification, as they aim to ensure minimum conditions of permanence for students in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability, without, however, compromising the fiscal limits of the State. Thus, investments in Social Action such as scholarships and support for food and accommodation, for example, are now managed based on criteria of economic rationality, integrating the logic of efficiency and budgetary sustainability that characterizes the contemporary model of funding the sector.

It is important to mention that, from 2015 to 2022, Portugal experienced a new political cycle with the left-wing coalition government led by António Costa. Such a government proposes to reverse austerity measures adopted after the 2008 financial crisis. The new government implemented measures such as reducing the working day to 35 hours, readjusting pensions, and increasing the

minimum wage, but maintained fiscal restraints that, embedded in the narrative of maintaining fiscal sustainability, affected social policies, including education.

Regarding higher education, there were efforts in the government of António Costa to resume public funding and revise the resource distribution formula. A new funding formula for higher education was proposed, oriented towards institutional quality and performance. However, in an unstable economic scenario, this formula was not implemented. Between 2016 and 2022, legislative contracts were adopted, providing for annual budget increases conditioned to performance and social inclusion goals in IES. Despite the government's commitment that State budget appropriations would not be lower than those of the State Budget Laws for 2016, from these legislative contracts, the promised budgetary reinforcement was insufficient to meet the needs of public higher education institutions, thus continuing to persist their underfunding process.

In this context, this article deals with higher education in Portugal and the Social Action in Higher Education (ASES, acronym in Portuguese) policy aimed at students in situations of social vulnerability, with an emphasis on public funding. We intend to analyze higher education in Portugal, from elements that help us understand the expansion and funding of this educational stage and the repercussions of these processes on the Social Action policy in Higher Education.

This research is qualitative in nature and used bibliographic review and documentary research as technical-methodological procedures. In the bibliographic research, we carried out research in books, journals, scientific articles and websites. Among the main authors who helped to compose this theoretical-reflective framework, the following stand out: Albuquerque, Seixas (2017); Cerdeira, Cabrito, Mucharreira (2022); Cabrito, Cerdeira (2021); Ferreira (2019), among others. For documentary research, the statistical record was used. To this end, we revisited official sources of open data present in internet repositories, such as PORTDATA and IGeFe.

This article consists of four sections, including this introduction. In the second section, we draw a look at higher education in Portugal, mobilizing reflections on the current formats of this educational level and the expansion and funding that intensified during the period from 2015 to 2022. In the third section, we discuss the Social Action in Higher Education (ASES, acronym in Portuguese)

policy, aimed at students in situations of financial insufficiency, seeking to understand how this policy is configured in the face of the State's disengagement in providing such action and the pressure mechanisms that have been installed in public universities so that they self-finance their activities. The reflections of this section are crossed by the debate about the expansion and funding of this social policy. In the fourth section, the research findings are revisited, revealing how the expansion and funding of higher education in Portugal reverberate in the ASEs and equity processes at this educational level.

## **Higher education in Portugal: characterization, expansion, and funding (2015-2022)**

Under the influence of recent changes, the Portuguese higher education system is organized in a binary system, according to the Basic Law of the Educational System (LBSE, acronym in Portuguese) No. 46 of 1986, in two types of education, namely: university education and polytechnic education. Thus, it follows a model organized into four study cycles. A short cycle, called the Professional Higher Technical Course (CTESP, acronym in Portuguese), and the other three cycles corresponding to the degrees of bachelor, master, and doctor. Higher education in Portugal is also structured through the public and private subsystems.

Table 1 shows the evolution of enrollment in higher education in the country, from 2015 to 2022, offering elements that help us to reflect the advances and contradictions expressed in this educational system.

**Table 1 – Evolution of enrollment in higher education in Portugal by subsystem and type of education (2015-2022)**

| Public           |          |          |         | Private  |          |        | Grand Total |
|------------------|----------|----------|---------|----------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Year             | Univers. | Polytec. | Total   | Univers. | Polytec. | Total  | Total       |
| 2015             | 191.827  | 107.255  | 299.152 | 44.113   | 15.255   | 59.368 | 358.520     |
| 2016             | 191.638  | 106.251  | 299.539 | 43.027   | 15.627   | 58.654 | 358.193     |
| 2017             | 192.201  | 110.395  | 302.596 | 43.013   | 16.334   | 59.347 | 361.943     |
| 2018             | 195.199  | 113.290  | 308.489 | 46.036   | 18.228   | 64.264 | 372.753     |
| 2019             | 199.388  | 116.801  | 316.189 | 48.479   | 20.579   | 69.058 | 385.247     |
| 2020             | 202.188  | 121.566  | 323.754 | 51.272   | 21.883   | 73.155 | 396.909     |
| 2021             | 208.227  | 126.912  | 335.139 | 53.072   | 23.784   | 76.856 | 411.995     |
| 2022             | 218.399  | 132.796  | 351.195 | 56.195   | 25.827   | 82.022 | 433.217     |
| Δ%2015<br>- 2022 | 14%      | 24%      | 17%     | 27%      | 69%      | 38%    | 21%         |

Source: Prepared by the authors from the information collected in the PORDATA platform (2025).

Last updated: 07/01/2024.

% 2015-2022 – Percentage variation of the year 2022 in relation to the year 2015.

7

It is noted, from table 1, that the overall total of students enrolled in higher education in Portugal increased in all years of the analyzed historical series, except in 2016. Enrollments in higher education institutions (IES, acronym in Portuguese) in the country showed, in 2022, an increase of 21% in relation to the year 2015. When analyzing the evolution of enrollment by type of education (university or polytechnic), there is, in general, a growth trend over the period. However, this trajectory was not linear: there was a drop in enrollment in public university and polytechnic education in 2016, as well as in private university education in 2016 and 2017.

Also in table 1, it is possible to notice that enrollment in university education takes precedence over polytechnic education. This situation "coincides with the highest social status of the university [in Portugal] in relation to polytechnic higher education" (Cabrito; Cerdeira, 2021, p. 154).

The data in table 1 also leave room to verify the contradictory dynamics of Portuguese higher education. Polytechnic higher education, even with

a lower social status, as emphasized by Cabrito and Cerdeira (2021), has grown. When analyzing private polytechnic higher education, for example, it appears that this type of education increased 69% in 2022, compared to 2015. This growth may be due to its status of "greater degree of insertion in the labor market" (Cabrito; Cerdeira, 2021, p. 154). This valuation partially determines new paradigms directed to this educational stage by supranational bodies, such as the OECD and the World Bank, which propose a closer relationship between higher education and business, a higher education, thus, inclined to meet the interests of the market regarding employability. This is also the result of the (re) configurations advocated through the Bologna Process, which, not exempt from economic ideologies, sought greater competitiveness in the European higher education area.

The data in table 1 also inform that enrollment in public higher education is predominant in Portugal and "has always been predominant, either because it is cheaper or because its social status in the country is higher than private higher education" (Cabrito; Cerdeira, 2021, p. 154).

8

It is reiterated that, although higher education in Portugal is public, it is not totally free, its frequency requires the payment of a tuition made by students or their families. Since the approval of Law No. 20/92, "attendance at public higher education requires the payment of an up-to-date tuition fee" (Cabrito, 1999, p. 194). Especially, since the 1990s, Portugal has witnessed "a process of privatization of this stage of education" (Cabrito, 1999, p. 194).

Law No. 37/2003, of August 22, is the standard that establishes the basis for the funding of higher education in Portugal. In it, the mode of distribution of higher education funding is explained. It is mentioned, therefore, that the funding of this educational level "takes place within the framework of a tripartite relationship between: a) the State and higher education institutions; b) students and higher education institutions; c) the State and students" (Portugal, 2003, p. 5359). The literature shows that the funding of higher education is paved by the understanding of the cost sharing of this level of education between governments, students and their families and other agents (Johnstone, 1986; Cabrito, 2002; Cerdeira, 2009).

The funding of public higher education institutions comes, for the most part, from the transfers of funds that are registered annually in the State budget.



In addition to the funding from this budget, public higher education institutions in Portugal adopt a diversified approach to finance their activities, among which are: the payment of tuition, research project funds, community funds, services provided to the community, partnerships, and donations, among others (Cruz, 2017).

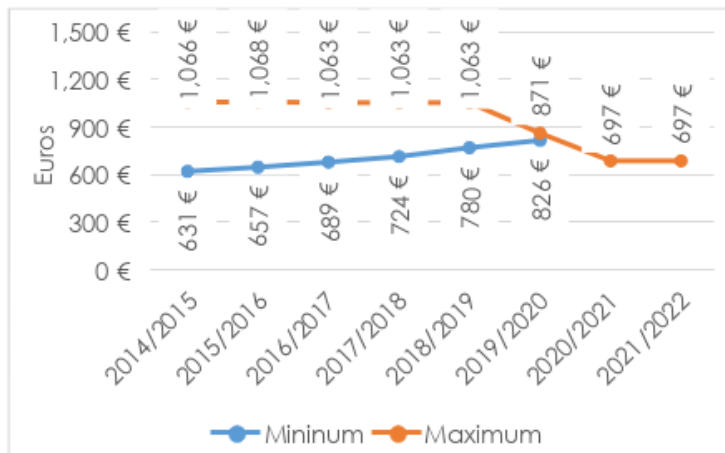
The diversification of funding sources is a controversial issue in higher education in Portugal. According to Cabrito (2004),

[...] diversifying funding sources appears, for higher education institutions, as the last "commandment" of liberal governments and means seeking funds beyond the State, whether through the sale/provision of services, "market-oriented" research or increased student contributions (Cabrito, 2004, p. 980, our translation).

In this sense, the current dynamics for the funding of higher education in Portugal support "the ideologization that the State is inoperative, leaving the private sector to assume itself as the space par excellence in which social policies and, in particular, education must be executed" (Santos; Neto, 2010, p. 34). Under this bias, higher education will "[...] metamorphosing like any other object that can be commodified" (Santos; Neto, 2010, p. 34).

Graph 1 highlights the evolution of the values established annually for the payment of tuition in public higher education institutions in Portugal.

**Graph 1 – Evolution of the value of tuition in public higher education institutions in Portugal established for the academic years 2014/2015 to 2021/2022 (Values in Euros)**



Source: Prepared by Cabrito, Cerdeira and Mucharreira (2024).  
Adapted by the authors (2025).

10

From the analysis of the values of the tuition, expressed in graph 1, it appears, in the portrayed historical series, that the maximum values suffered a very significant reduction for the academic year 2019/2020, maintaining the decrease in 2020/2021 and presenting no changes in the value in the academic year 2021/2022.

According to Cabrito, Cerdeira and Mucharreira (2022), the values of annuities in Portuguese higher education have not followed the parameters established in Law No. 37/2003. This legislation defines that the annual amount to be charged by public higher education institutions must correspond to at least 1.3 times the national minimum wage in force at the beginning of each academic year.

This mismatch between the legal norm and the practice adopted by the Portuguese government can be understood in the light of the economic and political context experienced by the country. As a result of the financial crisis that affected Portugal between 2010 and 2015, there was a significant decrease in the demand for higher education. Thus, in order to encourage the demand for this educational stage and "with a government whose prime minister belongs

to the Socialist Party, the amount of the tuition is below that provided for by the legislation [...]" (Cabrito; Cerdeira; Mucharreira, 2022, p. 16).

Following this analytical bias and in order to expand the understanding of higher education in Portugal and its funding mechanisms, table 2 corroborates the information regarding the funding of this educational level, exposing it from the sources of funding in tax revenues, own revenues, transfer within the scope of public administrations and community funding.

**Table 2 – Evolution of the revenue of Portuguese public higher education institutions by source of funding (2015-2021) (values in millions of euros updated by the Consumer Price Index at 2021)**

| Year      | Total * | %   | Revenues of taxes | %  | Own revenues | %  | Transfer within the scope of adm. Public | % | Financ. Com. | %  |
|-----------|---------|-----|-------------------|----|--------------|----|--|---|--------------|----|
| 2015      | 1.893,1 | 100 | 1.053,8           | 56 | 510,7        | 27 | 114,1                                    | 6 | 214,5        | 11 |
| 2016      | 1.908,5 | 100 | 1.090,9           | 57 | 523,3        | 27 | 109,0                                    | 6 | 185,3        | 10 |
| 2017      | 1.869,2 | 100 | 1.108,7           | 59 | 513,6        | 27 | 106,3                                    | 6 | 140,7        | 8  |
| 2018      | 1.956,7 | 100 | 1.118,8           | 57 | 538,9        | 28 | 103,2                                    | 5 | 195,8        | 10 |
| 2019      | 2.018,8 | 100 | 1.136,0           | 56 | 545,8        | 27 | 138,7                                    | 7 | 198,3        | 10 |
| 2020      | 2.103,4 | 100 | 1.194,3           | 57 | 502,4        | 24 | 174,1                                    | 8 | 232,6        | 11 |
| 2021      | 2.250,0 | 100 | 1.275,8           | 57 | 530,7        | 24 | 171,0                                    | 8 | 272,6        | 12 |
| $\bar{x}$ | -       | -   | -                 | 57 | -            | 26 | -  | 6 | -            | 10 |

Source: Prepared by the authors from the information collected in the IGeFE (2025).

From the analysis of table 2, it is possible to infer that tax revenues from the Portuguese State varied between 56% and 59% in relation to total revenues for public universities, representing the largest source of resources in the set of revenues that make up the higher education budget.

Table 2 shows the importance of the own revenues of public higher education institutions. Such revenues represented, in 2021, 24% of the budget, equal to the total revenues destined to public higher education institutions. It is necessary to emphasize that the weight of own revenues in the budget of Portuguese higher education institutions causes pressure for them to be maintainers of their activities. In this sense, given the need to raise more resources, universities "acquire a profile more manager than academic" (Ferreira 2019, p. 90). In addition to a lower participation of the State in public funding, this process reveals the "market mechanisms that are emerging in higher education" (Ferreira 2019, p. 90).

In addition, the contribution of transfers within the scope of public administrations and community financing funds must be considered, as shown in table 2. It should be noted, however, in particular, with regard to community funding, taking as an example the Portugal 2030 Program, that universities and polytechnic educational institutions must be bound by the guiding principles of this Program. These principles are focused on: guidelines for results, transparency, and accountability; simplification, which dialogues with the reduction of costs associated with management and deadlines; subsidiarity, which proposes the need to match the corresponding territorial level of policy decision with the level of funding decision (Portugal, 2030). In this way, higher education institutions are being transmuted to function under the archetype of a company. Under this nuance, institutional autonomy gradually loses its centrality. It is also important to note that Portugal has presented, in accordance with Mendes, Correia, Almeida and Marques (2021, p. 24), a "high budgetary dependence" on such funds for the feasibility of national policies.

In view of the above, regarding the expansion and funding of higher education in Portugal, it is important to highlight, based on the arguments of Cabrito (2024), that this educational stage, although still elitist, has managed to expand the access of low-income students. In the academic year 2020/2021, 82.6% of students who accessed higher education in Portugal, according to this author, presented a household income level corresponding to the high/medium high (greater than 1,500 euros) and medium (between 870 euros and 1,500 euros) levels. In the same school year, 17.4% of low-income students (less than 870 euros) attended this educational stage. This percentage represents a 28%

increase in the access of students from the least favored social strata to higher education, when compared to the 1994/1995 school year (Cabrito, 2024). These data show, therefore, that higher education in Portugal, albeit slowly, has been democratized (Cabrito, 2024).

It should be reiterated, however, that higher education in Portugal, despite continuing to expand, still cannot be accessible to all. In 2022, only 26.8% of the population aged 15 years or older residing in Portugal had completed higher education (PORDATA, 2025).

Under this bias, the importance of social action policy in higher education is reinforced, since, without this action, many students would not be able to bear the high costs that attendance at this level of education requires. Social Action in Higher Education is the agenda for reflection in the following section.

## **Expansion and funding of social action policy in higher education in Portugal: support for students in situations of social vulnerability**

13

The transitions that have occurred in higher education in recent decades have allowed the Portuguese higher education system to move “from an elitist system to a diversified mass system” (Castro; Seixas; Cabral Neto, 2010, p. 42).

For Trow (1973; 2005), a mass system in higher education is characterized, among others, by the attendance between 16% and 50% of the age group from 18 to 24 years. In addition, such a system tends to respond to the demands of higher education interests of a broader and more diverse group from less privileged social classes.

Thus, the access of this “new” contingent of students to higher education requires thinking about structures that contribute to the permanence of these students in these educational institutions. Thus, social action in higher education is presented as an indispensable role in the construction of these new configurations of higher education in Portugal.

The Social Action in Higher Education (ASES, acronym in Portuguese) policy in Portugal has as its fundamental objective “to allow all students to attend

higher education, regardless of their socioeconomic conditions" (Pereira, 2019, p. 113, our translation).

In recent contexts, ASES is demarcated by Decree-Law No. 129/93, of April 22, 1993. This Decree establishes the principles of social action in higher education, emphasizing that this action starts to "[...] develop within the scope of the respective educational institutions, and it is up to them to define the management model to be implemented and the choice of the most appropriate instruments to implement the policy" (Portugal, 1993, p. 1967). In addition to being directed to public higher education institutions, the Decree provides that such action also serves non-public higher education students.

It should be noted that the provision of support services provided to financially disadvantaged higher education students comprises: a) *direct support*, which is attributed to the granting of scholarships and emergency aid; and b) *indirect support*, which is effective through the granting of access to food and accommodation, access to health services, support to cultural and sports activities and access to other educational support (Portugal, 2007).

14 In addition to the support modalities explained above, the State provides other types of support, namely: the award of merit scholarships; the granting of support to students with special needs; specific support to displaced students or students from autonomous regions and the promotion of a loan system to empower students.

Table 3 outlines the number of scholarship students in higher education by education subsystem in the years from 2015 to 2022.

**Table 3 – Evolution of scholarship students in higher education in Portugal by education subsystem (2015-2022)**

| Year           | Scholarship students at public IES | Δ%  | Scholarship students at IES Private | Δ%  | Total scholarship students (A) | Δ%  | Total students enrolled in IES (B) | %A/B |
|----------------|------------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------------|-----|------------------------------------|------|
| 2015           | 62.560                             | -   | 7.051                               | -   | 69.611                         | -   | 358.520                            | 19%  |
| 2016           | 64.563                             | 3%  | 7.698                               | 9%  | 72.261                         | 4%  | 358.193                            | 20%  |
| 2017           | 65.967                             | 2%  | 8.619                               | 12% | 74.586                         | 3%  | 361.943                            | 21%  |
| 2018           | 65.324                             | -1% | 9.043                               | 5%  | 74.367                         | 0%  | 372.753                            | 20%  |
| 2019           | 63.216                             | -3% | 9.361                               | 4%  | 72.577                         | -2% | 385.247                            | 19%  |
| 2020           | 69.178                             | 9%  | 10.656                              | 14% | 79.834                         | 10% | 396.909                            | 20%  |
| 2021           | 69.395                             | 0%  | 11.065                              | 4%  | 80.460                         | 1%  | 411.995                            | 20%  |
| 2022           | 69.569                             | 0%  | 12.374                              | 12% | 81.943                         | 2%  | 433.217                            | 19%  |
| Δ% 2015 - 2022 | -                                  | 11% | -                                   | 75% | -                              | 18% | -                                  | -    |

Source: Prepared by the authors from the information collected in the PORDATA platform (2025).

Δ% - Percentage variation in relation to the previous year.

%A/B - Proportion of scholarship students in relation to the total number of students enrolled in IES.

Last updated: 20/08/2024.

Between the years 2015 and 2022, as shown in table 3, there is a moderate growth in the total number of scholarship students in higher education in Portugal. This number went from 69,611 in 2015 to 81,943 in 2022, which represents an increase of 18%. However, this evolution was not symmetrical between the public and private subsystems.

When looking at the total number of students in the public subsystem, it can be seen that, in 2018 and 2019, this number of students with support scholarships in higher education decreased by 1% and 3%, respectively. In the years 2021 and 2022, this number of students with scholarships remained basically stable.

In the private subsystem, a different movement was observed. In this subsystem, there was a greater increase in the number of students who received scholarships in the analyzed period. While the total number of students with

scholarships in public higher education increased in 2022, 11%, compared to 2015, the total number of students in private higher education, who received support scholarships, in the same period, increased 75%.

This dynamics of increase in scholarship holders in private higher education can be justified by the growth in the demand for enrollment through this subsystem in Portugal, as already seen in table 1, which causes a greater social diversification of students who access higher education through this route and, consequently, raises an increase in applications for scholarships.

This increase in the number of scholarship holders in private IES, whose payment to the user is made with public resources, may also represent the strategies in force in the contemporary capitalist system that found in education a new field of action to increase its profits, through the appropriation of public funds.

With regard to the proportion of scholarship students in relation to the total number of enrolled students (column %A/B), this remained relatively stable over the period, ranging between 19%, 20% and 21%. In 2022, for example, scholarship students represented 19% of the total number of students enrolled in universities.

16

Following this bias of analysis and reflection on the Social Action policy in Higher Education, we directed the debate towards funding. It is important to mention that this support has faced the macroeconomic reservations of the policies contributed to the neoliberal ideology, which advocate the reduction of public spending.

The budget of the social action service in higher education in Portugal is articulated by a diversity of funding sources that, together, are aimed at mobilizing a successful academic trajectory. These sources are designated in table 4, presented below.

It is through the budgetary composition of these sources of funding that the Portuguese ASES, by offering direct support to students through scholarships, or indirect support through subsidies in food and accommodation, for example, seeks to promote access, permanence, and completion in higher education, especially those of more disadvantaged socioeconomic origin.



**Table 4 – Evolution of resources implemented for Social Action in Portuguese Higher Education by source of funding (2015-2022) (values in millions of euros updated by the Consumer Price Index at 2022)**

| Year | Total       | State Budget | Own revenues | Community funding | Transfers within the scope of public administrations |
|------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------|--|
| 2015 | 246.590.649 | 104.089.440  | 47.353.654   | 92.300.768        | 2.846.787  |
| 2016 | 236.284.545 | 98.624.854   | 46.158.938   | 87.420.307        | 4.080.446  |
| 2017 | 238.730.108 | 91.701.281   | 46.365.240   | 96.393.421        | 4.270.167  |
| 2018 | 250.717.329 | 98.907.851   | 52.623.906   | 95.416.871        | 3.768.700  |
| 2019 | 242.851.474 | 91.319.654   | 49.062.779   | 99.756.630        | 2.712.412  |
| 2020 | 211.285.831 | 94.994.765   | 32.411.377   | 80.319.494        | 3.560.196  |
| 2021 | 211.929.032 | 93.034.944   | 31.054.949   | 83.696.928        | 4.142.211  |
| 2022 | 246.332.447 | 101.968.894  | 45.763.172   | 82.985.304        | 15.615.077   |

Fonte: Source: Prepared by the authors from the information collected in the PORDATA platform (2025).

It does not include the indirect social action of private higher education.

Last updated: 16/09/2024.

As shown in table 4, the total resources for social support in higher education in Portugal, in the analyzed historical series, showed a reduction in relation to the previous years, in 2016, 2019 and 2020.

The budget from the State represented, from what is presented in table 4, the largest source of funding of social action in higher education in Portugal, excluding the years 2017 and 2019. The amounts for this action in the State budget ranged from 91.3 million euros to 104 million euros, in the period from 2015 to 2022.

When looking at the number of resources from the State budget for ASES in 2022, 101.9 million euros, it appears that this number of resources was

lower than the amount contributed in 2015 (seven years earlier), which was 104 million euros. The retraction of budgetary resources for social action to higher education students may represent, especially for those with less favored economic conditions, the denial, among others, of the right to equal opportunities, given that the economic and financial condition of this student is an obstacle to their access and permanence at this educational level.

This non-expansion of the state budget dialogues with the fiscal austerity policies that were established in Portugal, with greater emphasis from the economic crisis of 2008, and which, nowadays, even if in a milder way, are still in vogue. Such policies are based on narratives of fiscal sustainability, among others. In this sense,

[...] as long as the problem of the medium and long-term sustainability of public finances is not in the process of being solved, budget policy must be neutral, [this implies saying that it] must neither be restrictive, nor must it be expansionary so as not to be an obstacle to the recovery of the economy (Rodrigues; Tavares, 2013, p. 8).

18 Under this aspect, the funding of social action by the Portuguese State receives budgetary contribution in an amount considered, by the political actors, "reasonable", since it is accepted in such a way as not to impact the deficit of the public budget.

It is also noteworthy, from what is pointed out in table 4, the weight of the IES' own revenues in the composition of the Social Action in Higher Education budget. These revenues, in the years investigated, varied between 31 million euros and 52.6 million euros, a very high amount that requires IES to increasingly seek external partnerships in order to manage the maintenance of their activities. Pereira (2019) argues that the increase in private co-participation in the costs of higher education brings risks, among them, "[...] the possibility of limiting access, discouraging students from economically disadvantaged households to continue their studies" (Pereira, 2019, p. 39).

It is also worth mentioning the budgetary burden of the source of community funding in the composition of Social Action Higher Education resources in Portugal. The funds from this budget source ranged from 80 million euros to 96.3 million euros, in the years from 2015 to 2022. Despite their importance in expanding Social Action Higher Education resources, these funds are made

"due to the need for [Portugal] to meet the regulations of the European Union" (Rolim, 2017, p. 306). In the midst of these guidelines, the higher education system gains relevance and is combined as a "key piece in smart specialization strategies" (Rolim, 2017, p. 306). It is important to mention that, to face these requirements, higher education systems need to technically readjust their practices.

By technically aligning with community funds projects, Portuguese IES and social action services receive a significant number of financial resources, as evidenced in the data in table 4. In this sense, there is a disguised imposition of option – IES follow the requirements set by community funds in order to complement their sources of funding and thus offer social action services with greater effectiveness to students who request them.

It should be mentioned, from the reflections made, that, instead of investing directly in higher education institutions, primarily public, the Portuguese State opts for an individual investment, granting a financial aid to the student that may or may not be granted. Thus, the social support system in higher education in Portugal reflects the conceptions based on the neoliberal State, in which the "universality of rights, [is] transmuted into individual privileges to be guaranteed to each one" (Carvalho; Baptista; Carvalho; Graça, 2010, p. 240).

Through the attribution of support scholarships, there is a "precarious realization of the right to education" (Antunes; Peroni, 2017, p. 207). Instead of promoting the autonomy and emancipation of the individual, such scholarships, when consolidated through selectivity, reinforce asymmetries and separations and end up "weakening the democratization and citizenship promised by the expansion of access to education" (Antunes; Peroni, 2017, p. 207), so widespread in contemporary Portuguese society.

## Conclusão

It is possible to mention, from the reflections made, that Portugal has maintained a process of expansion in higher education, evidenced by the growth in enrollment over the period from 2015 to 2022, except for 2016.

As for funding, revenues from the collection of State taxes for the maintenance of public higher education activities and projects were the majority and represented, in the years from 2015 to 2022, an average of 57% of the total resources contributed to higher education in the general calculation of this budget.

It is important to note that own revenues in 2021, for example, represented 24% of the total amounts made available to the higher education budget. The weight of these revenues in the total composition of the Portuguese higher education budget puts pressure on educational institutions to be maintainers of their activities. This weight also causes “cost sharing” in the funding of IES to burden Portuguese families, since they are the ones who bear, to a large extent, the costs of attending higher education in that country.

The role of revenues from community funds should also be highlighted. Such resources require from IES counterparts that reposition them under the paradigms of a company, with the establishment of parameters of results, transparency, and accountability, causing the loss of autonomy of public IES.

Regarding the Social Action in Higher Education policy, it is important to note that the State budget was 101.9 million euros, lower than those allocated in 2015, which were 104 million euros. This reduction in the role of the State in maintaining this public policy can mainly impact students from the most vulnerable social strata, given that they are the ones who present difficulties in maintaining themselves in higher education institutions and completing their courses with educational quality.

In view of the above, a scenario of increased access is signaled, but with structural limits to equity in Portuguese higher education. Thus, thinking about the continuity of the expansion of enrollment in higher education in Portugal with a view to serving all students who demand it, as a political action that is based on the idea of higher education as a public good, also permeates the strengthening of the Social Action Higher Education policy as a way that can raise the construction of a more democratic, inclusive, and humane educational project.

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